

Duluth — The decade of the 1890s represented a marked transition in the shipping history of Lake Superior—not only in terms of the regional economy but also in the makeup and safety of the vessels plying the Great Lakes.

Dr. Julius Wolff, Jr., UMD associate professor of political science, spoke on "Lake Superior Shipwrecks of the 1890s" at the Minnesota Research Trust Fund lecture Tuesday in Kirby Student Center ballroom.

The wooden schooners, which still operated at the beginning of the decades—mostly as towed barges—gave way to the propeller-driven steam vessels and, later, to steel-hulled ships.

During the 1890s, 153 major accidents were reported on the lakes, taking 73 lives. In the last ten years, only one ship has gone down and 16 lives lost, Dr. Wolff, pointed out.

The rash of accidents in the 1890s, Dr. Wolff said, was not really a bad record "when one considers that tempestuous Lake Superior was not too well equipped with light-houses or life-savers, while Coast Guard cutters, radio and radar were as yet unknown."

Sailors in those days also faced the scourge of smoke blankets every summer and fall from the ever present forest fires in the coastal country, in addition to fierce storms, collisions, structural failures and human error.

Dr. Wolff said the Lake Superior country was booming at the time. Iron and copper mining, logging and lumber producing, grain shipping and freight hauling kept the ships plying the Great Lakes in increasing numbers.

Along with the lively commerce came a revolution in ship design and construction. "Many of these ships were literally new toys," Wolff said, "incompletely understood by sailors, numbers of whom were really converted schoonermen. Shipwrecks were a regular occurrence, part of the assumed risks of the business."

It was common at the time for a single steamer to tow from one to three schooner-barges. The schooners could sail with safety under canvas; but when tow-lines would break suddenly on the open lake, accidents often befell the schooners before sails could be unfurled. Both major accidents in 1890 were due to this problem. The barge Ben Brink was driven ashore near Eagle Harbor and beaten to pieces in September of that year, its six-man crew presumed drowned. The schooner Comrade suffered a similar fate the same month, its eight-man crew was never seen again.

Fires caused much damage and, often, loss of life, Dr. Wolff said. In October, 1890, the old wooden-arch steamer Winslow burned in St. Louis Bay, Duluth, despite the valient efforts of Duluth firemen. Lost in the fire were 200 barrels of brown sugar. "The aroma of burning sugar, drifting landward, allegedly attracted bears, several of which were seen in downtown Duluth the following day," Dr. Wolff added.

When the new steel freighter Western Reserve broke in two on the night of August 30, 1892, near Whitefish Point, the sinking caused consternation among ship designers that steel might not be proper hull material. A sister ship, the W. H. Gilcher, sank

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two months later under similar conditions and caused ship builders to use tougher steel, more heavily reinforced. A sharp decline in such accidents resulted.

Dr. Wolff reviewed many of the other major accidents in Lake Superior, stories of heroic rescues, damaged vessels limping to port, gradual improvement in safety devices and rescue techniques.

During the decade 22 schooners and 20 steamers had gone to the bottom at a loss of more than \$2,000,000, Dr. Wolff said.

"Indeed, this was the price of commerce on storm-tossed Lake Superior. Yet, despite the many handicaps, the Lake Superior sailors had delivered the goods, helping to make possible the spectacular rise of civilization in the Lakehead country."